

Was Chinggis Khan literate?

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Was Chinggis Khan literate? The very question probably seems somewhat preposterous to most historians familiar with the course and particulars of his life. (For our present purposes, we will regard «literacy» as the ability to read, and not necessarily the ability to write.¹) The Mongols did have a writing system. They got their script from the Naimans, who got it from the Uighurs, an ancient Turkic people who got their script from the Sogdians, an Iranian people who in turn took theirs from an Aramaic script.² But what we know of Chinggis Khan's interaction with the written word seems to suggest that he himself was illiterate and empowered trusted associates to attend to the reading and writing in his administration, as his distinguished twentieth-century European biographer Paul Ratchnevsky notes:

«Genghis learned state administration from the Naimans. He was taught administrative methodology by the former Naiman chancellor, Tata-tonga, who persuaded him that royal orders should in future be legalized by a seal... The illiterate Genghis Khan was also quick to grasp the importance of the written word, which would ensure that his wishes and his laws would be preserved accurately and without alteration for future generations. He gave orders that the Genghisid princes were to learn the Uighur script used by the Naimans.»³

Evidence abounds of the value Chinggis Khan attached to the Uighur script, but very little of this evidence directly suggests that he himself took steps to become literate in it. Records the Persian historian Juvaini:

«In accordance and agreement with his own mind he [Chinggis Khan] established a rule for every occasion and a regulation for every circumstance; while for every crime he fixed a penalty. And since the Tartar peoples had no script of their own, he gave orders that Mongol children should learn writing from the Uighur; and that these yosas and ordinances should be written down on rolls. These rolls are called the *Great Book of Yosas* and are kept in the treasury of the chief princes. Whenever a khan ascends the throne, or a great army is mobilized, or the princes assemble and begin [to consult together] concerning affairs of state and the administration thereof, they produce these rolls and model their actions thereon; and proceed with the disposition of armies or the destruction of provinces and cities in the manner therein prescribed.»⁴

Chinggis Khan highly prized scholars with the gifts of languages and writing and recruited them into his own service. The young Uighur Mengsusi (Mungsuz) pleased Chinggis Khan so much with his knowledge of Uighur literature that Chinggis prophesied of him: «This boy has fire in his eyes. The day will come when he will be of great value.» Chinggis Khan also valued craftsmen and medical doctors enough to spare them from the otherwise general butchery that attended his campaigns.⁵ Juvaini gives us some insight into how mastery of the Uighur script was apparently one important way for bright young men to ingratiate themselves with Chinggis Khan and become his trusted officials:

«The Emir Arghun, after mastering the Uighur script and having grown into young manhood, encountered every manner of luck and good fortune. Young though he was he went to the Court of Qa'an and was enrolled amongst the *bitikchis*. Day by day Qa'an looked upon him with greater favour, and he was still in the flower of youth when he sent him to Khitai together with Qaban on an important mission. He remained there some time, and upon his return to Qa'an was nominated, because of his complete reliability, to investigate [an important case]...»⁶

But our assumptions about Chinggis Khan's illiteracy have recently been called into question. At the Seventh international Congress of Mongolists (held in Ulaanbaatar in August 1997) I listened to a paper given by mainland Chinese researcher Chiang Ch'uan 江川 of the Inner Mongolian Xing'an [Khingan] League Art and Literature Association. In his paper Chiang argued that a passage at the end of the *Hsuan-feng ch'ing-hui lu* 玄風慶會錄 (Record of the Joyous Society of the Mysterious Wind; hereafter abbreviated HFCHL) by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai 耶律楚材 (1189–1243),⁷ the famous ethnic Kitan advisor to Chinggis Khan, establishes the great khan's literacy. He also circulated a trilingual (English, Mongolian, and Chinese) pamphlet version of this paper before and after his presentation.⁸

Some background information at this point will likely be helpful. In 1222 the Taoist monk Ch'iu Ch'u-chi 丘處機, perhaps more commonly known by his religious name Ch'ang-ch'un 長春, was summoned out of China by Chinggis Khan to visit him in the Hindu Kush Mountains and in Samarkand. Ch'ang-ch'un's follower Li Chih-ch'ang 李志常 wrote an account of their travels entitled «Journey to the West» (*Hsi-yu chi* 西遊記), translations of which have been done by Bretschneider⁹ and Waley.¹⁰ Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, himself a Buddhist, took down one of Ch'ang-ch'un's sermons to Chinggis Khan on Taoism, the text of which is the HFCHL.¹¹ Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai then later wrote an account entitled *Hsi-yu lu* 西遊錄, a large portion of which was critical of Ch'ang-ch'un and his

particular sect of Taoism. The text of the *Hsi-yu lu* has been translated by the well-known Mongolist Igor de Rachewiltz.¹²

Of these accounts relating to Ch'ang-ch'un's visit with Chinggis Khan it is the HFCHL that interests us most. Chiang's case seems to rest on a single sentence at the very end of the HFCHL in which Chinggis Khan gives his attendants the following order after having heard a sermon by Ch'ang-ch'un: «Record them [Taoist teachings] in bamboo records [? *Chien-ts'e* 簡冊], and in the future We¹³ shall personally review them» (*Lu chih chien-ts'e*, *Chen Chiang ch'in lan* 錄之簡冊朕將親覽). In terms of the question at hand, the meaning of this sentence hinges upon a single character: the verb *lan* 覽 . Chiang, it seems (p. 10), assumes that *lan* here means 'to read', «*yüeh-tu* 閱讀 ».

With this key passage from the HFCHL in mind, Chiang poses the following question: «If Chinggis Khan were illiterate... how could he have had the extraordinary reading ability to review personally the exalted and profound language of essential Taoist teachings?» In his conclusion, Chiang (p. 11) argues that this single passage is *prima facie* evidence for Chinggis Khan's literacy in Mongolian at the very least, and also perhaps in Chinese as well:

«The actual historical record fully proves that there need be no doubt of Chinggis Khan's literacy. What is more, his reading ability in Mongolian must not be underestimated. The question of whether he knew only Mongolian or knew both Mongolian and Chinese, and to what extent he might have known Chinese, must await further discovery and research.»

Chiang Ch'uan seems to think that the HFCHL was virtually unknown prior to the mainland Chinese publication of the *Tao-tsang* by the Chekiang People's Publishing House in 1990. But its text was included in editions of the *Tao-tsang* published in Shanghai in 1923–26 and in Taiwan in 1977.¹⁴ It has been known in the West at least since 1929, when the great French Sinologist Paul Pelliot made the following remarks about it:

«Mais il est assez singulier que Ye-liu Tch'ou-ts'ai, très hostile à K'ieou Tch'ou-ki, soit vraiment l' auteur de cet opuscule si favorable au taoïsme. Il faudrait rechercher dans l'ensemble des oeuvres de K'ieou Tch'ou-ki et de Ye-liu Tch'ou-ts'ai si on rencontre quelque renseignement supplémentaire à cet sujet.»¹⁵

A Japanese translation of the HFCHL appeared in 1948,¹⁶ and the celebrated Professor Yao Ts'ung-wu 姚從吾 published a detailed analysis of it in 1959.¹⁷ Prominent Mongolist and Sinologist Igor de Rachewiltz

did take some notice of the HFCHL in an important 1962 publication. He commented on this passage without further fanfare as follows:

«At the end of the work there are a few lines recording what Chinggis said after having heard Ch'ang-ch'un's discourse («I have received your earnest instructions and listened respectfully to your advice. These are all things difficult to practise; however, I shall certainly act in accordance with the Immortal's instructions and diligently put them into effect.») The emperor goes on to say that he has already ordered his «close minister(s)» (*chin ch'en*) to record Ch'ang-ch'un's words in a document, so that he could personally read them, and should some of their deep meaning (*hsuan chih*) escape him, he would ask Ch'ang-ch'un for further instruction.»¹⁸

Chiang's conclusions and assumptions about the meaning of *lan* in the context he has located are, in my opinion, insufficiently warranted. One modern Chinese-English dictionary that has fairly decent coverage of the colloquial and literary meanings of Chinese characters and terms gives the following definitions for *lan*:

1. 'to look'; 'to inspect'; 'to perceive', 'to read'
2. 'to listen (what others say)'
3. a Chinese family name¹⁹

Thus it would also be quite reasonable to assume that Chinggis Khan would review these teachings in the future not by reading over them himself, but by having them read aloud to him. Chinggis Khan was in the habit of aurally reviewing written material with scribes. For example, Chinggis Khan gave the following instructions to his adopted son Shigi-khutukhu:

«Write down the details of the distribution of rewards and of the legal decisions made for the nation and bind these in a Blue Book (*koke debter*). Until the days of my most distant successors, no one shall alter whatever, after consultation with myself, Shigi-khutukhu shall decide and set down in blue writing on white paper.»²⁰

While Chiang Ch'uan's case for Chinggis Khan's literacy hinges on the meaning of a single verb in a single isolated sentence, the case against his literacy is not so confined. Historical considerations also seem to vitiate Chiang's case. As for Chinggis Khan's possible literacy in Chinese, Herbert Franke long ago established that even after Khubilai, many of the Yuan emperors read Chinese only with the greatest of difficulty.²¹ It is, therefore, extremely unlikely that Chinggis Khan, who had limited contact with the Chinese world, knew any Chinese at all. And we know that Chinggis Khan's discussions with Ch'ang-ch'un were recorded in Turkish,

Chinese, Persian, and Mongolian.²² Are we therefore to assume that the great Khan would also read over Ch'ang-ch'un's teachings in Turkish and even Persian?

When could Chinggis Khan possibly have learned to read Mongolian in the Uighur script? Certainly not during his youth, when almost all people attain their literacy. The Mongols did not adopt the Uighur script until after their defeat of the Naimans, so their written record could not have begun before 1206,²³ when Chinggis Khan was well into middle age.²⁴ From 1207 to 1210 he was on campaign against the Tangut state of Hsia. The years 1211 to 1215 were full of his battles against the Jurchen state of Chin. In 1216 and 1217 he had to deal with dissident tribes (mainly the Keraits and Tumats) in Mongolia. From 1218 to 1221 he waged relentless and devastating warfare against Khwarazm, Bokhara, Samarkand, and other Central Asian Islamic states. Then comes 1222, the year he met with Ch'ang-ch'un in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan and in Samarkand and was supposedly highly literate. (Chinggis Khan spent the remaining years of his life in campaigns against the Russians and the Tanguts. He died in 1227, most likely at the hands of the captured Tangut Queen.²⁵) I doubt that during his long and turbulent life Chinggis Khan had much time to learn to read at all, much less the quiescent leisure necessary to digest the profound and recondite doctrines of alchemical Taoism. Chinggis Khan did not lead a contemplative life. He may have grasped some of the basics of Taoist teachings, but his understanding of them was likely based on oral instruction and intuition, not erudition.²⁶

Conclusion

The evidence supporting Chiang's position is isolated and tenuous, while linguistic, historical, and textual considerations militating against it are abundant. Chiang Ch'uan has raised an important issue about the life of the great Khan, but he has not established a strong case for his literacy. Given the current absence of further known corroborative evidence of any nature of Chinggis Khan's literacy, historians must still assume that Chinggis Khan was largely if not completely illiterate.

Notes

- 1 Bretschneider expresses doubt that Chinggis Khan could write in any language: «With reference to Chinghiz' letter addressed to Ch'ang ch'un, I need not mention that it was not written by himself; he could not write in any language. Evidently the ideas of the conqueror were taken down by a Chinese in his suite, very likely by

- Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, his able minister.» Quoted from E. Bretschneider, M.D., *Mediaeval researches from Eastern Asiatic sources* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1910), v. 1., p. 37.
- 2 Nicholas Poppe, *Grammar of Written Mongolian* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964), p. 1. The details of the transmission and transformation of the script and vocabulary of written Mongolian are not known in detail. See A. Róna-Tas, «Some notes on the terminology of Mongolian writing», *Acta Orient. Hung.* v. 18 (1965), pp. 119–120.
 - 3 Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 94.
 - 4 `Ala-ad-Din `Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The history of the World-Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), v. 1, p. 25.
 - 5 Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 167.
 - 6 `Ala-ad-Din `Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The history of the World-Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), v. 2, p. 506.
 - 7 For biographies of Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai see *In the service of the Khan: Eminent personalities of the early Mongol-Yüan period (1200–1300)*, ed. Igor de Rachewiltz et. al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1993), pp. 136–172 (biography by Igor de Rachewiltz), and «Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai (1189–1243): Buddhist idealist and Confucian statesman», in Arthur F. Wright and Denis C. Twitchett, eds., *Confucian personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 185–205.
 - 8 Jiang Chuan (Chiang Ch'uan), «A textual research on whether Cenghis [sic] Khan was illiterate or not» (Chinese title «Ch'eng-chi-ssu Khan shih-tzu fou k'ao 成吉思汗識字否考») (Inner Mongolia Social Science Academy [sic], n.d.). (Chiang's piece is in simplified Chinese characters.) The English version in Chiang's leaflet is awkward and unclear, so readers should rely on the Chinese or Mongolian versions of it to understand his thesis.
 - 9 E. Bretschneider, M.D., *Mediaeval researches from Eastern Asiatic sources* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1910), v. 1., pp. 35–108.
 - 10 Arthur Waley, *The travels of an alchemist* (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1931).
 - 11 But this did not interfere with his scribal objectivity or accuracy, argues Igor de Rachewiltz: «However, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai recorded Ch'ang-ch'un's words. Firstly, this was part of his duties for, as we know, Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai combined at this time the office of astrologer-astronomer with that of scribe-secretary; secondly, when this took place (end of 1222), Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai

was not yet [hostile] towards Ch'ang-ch'un, a consideration which, in any case, would have hardly allowed him to disobey an imperial order.» Quoted from Igor de Rachewiltz, «The *Hsi-yu lu* 西遊錄 by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai 耶律楚材 », *Monumenta Serica* 21 (1962): p. 71 (n. 128).

- 12 Igor de Rachewiltz, «The *Hsi-yu lu* 西遊錄 by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai 耶律楚材 », *Monumenta Serica* 21 (1962), pp. 1–128.
- 13 Chen 朕, the «royal» personal singular pronoun traditionally used exclusively by Chinese emperors.
- 14 *Tao-tsang* 道藏 (Shanghai: Commercial Press), pp. 1923–26; *Cheng-t'ung Tao-tsang* 正統道藏 (Taipei: I-wen yin-shu kuan, 1977), 60 vols., vol. 5, pp. 3491–3495.
- 15 Paul Pelliot, in *T'oung Pao* 26 (1929), p. 175; quoted in de Rachewiltz, «The *Hsi-yu lu*», p. 70 (n. 168).
- 16 This translation appears in the Appendix of Iwamura Shinobu, *Chôshun shinjin saiyûki* (Tokyo, 1948), pp. 164–180.
- 17 Yao Ts'ung-wu, «Yüan Ch'iu Ch'u-chi nien-p'u 元丘處機年譜 », in *Tung-pei shih lun-ts'ung* 東北史論叢 (Taipei, 1959), v. 2, p. 257 (214–276). Yao argues that the text of the HFCHL included in the *Tao-tsang* is probably not the original transcript of Ch'ang-ch'un's teachings drawn up at the orders of Chinggis Khan, but rather a *post facto* compilation by adherents of the Ch'üan-chen sect of Taoism, possibly with the collaboration of Ch'ang-ch'un himself.
- 18 Igor de Rachewiltz, «The *Hsi-yu lu* 西遊錄 by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai 耶律楚材 », *Monumenta Serica* 21 (1962), pp. 69–72 (n. 168), quotation from p. 70.
- 19 Liang Shih-ch'iu, ed. in chief, *A new practical Chinese-English dictionary* (Taipei: The Far East Book Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 1000, entry #5497 for *lan*. I have not pursued the meanings of this character much farther than this. More detailed examination of other dictionaries or the *P'ei-wen yün-fu* might well afford more information on the meanings of *lan* and its historical development.
- 20 Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 95, citing paragraph 203 of the *Secret History of the Mongols*; his own translation?
- 21 H. Franke, «Could the Mongol emperors read and write Chinese?», *Asia Major* 3 (1953), pp. 28–41.
- 22 Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 185.
- 23 Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,

- 1991), p. 95. For the chronological survey of Chinggis Khan's life I rely on the handy Chronology of Ratchnevsky, pp. 282–283.
- 24 Approximate dates for the birth of Temujin (Chinggis Khan) range from 1155 to 1167. But even during the early 1220s, literacy does not seem to have been extensive among the Mongols. The *Hsi-yu chi* by Li Chih-ch'ang states quite explicitly that the Mongols along his route were «unaccustomed to written records» (*su wu wen-chi* 俗無文籍) and that their contracts were either oral or betokened by wooden carvings. See Bretschneider, p. 53, and Waley, p. 67.
- 25 On the death of Chinggis Khan see David C. Wright, «The death of Chinggis Khan in Mongolian, Chinese, Persian, and European sources», in *Historical and linguistic interaction between Inner-Asia and Europe*, ed. Árpád Berta (Szeged, Hungary: University of Szeged, 1997), pp. 425–433.
- 26 Although illiterate, Chinggis Khan was not necessarily an uneducated man: «Genghis shared the nomad attitude towards the way of life of civilized nations, finding their life and activities strange and threatening. Yet the illiterate Genghis was not uneducated and he expanded his understanding of the world from contact with the many representatives of foreign cultures in his entourage. From the Muslims Yalavach and Mas'ud he learned of the importance of cities; the Khitans Ila Ahai and Ila Chuzai would have acquainted him with the principles of the Confucian ethic and he learned about Taoist contemplation in his discussions with Changchun.» Quoted from Ratchnevsky, pp. 166–167.